The book of Genesis presents the interpreter with some difficult challenges, not the least of which is the need to come to terms with its long process of development. Did the stories originate among the people and circulate independently for some period of time? What then could have brought them together into cycles of traditions, and was there some type of theological intentionality to this stage? At some point the transition from oral to written literature occurred; but was this an incidental move, or was it one of theological import because of new levels of interpretation added by the compilers, those whom scholars have come to know as the Yahwist, the Elohist, and the Priestly group? How are we to relate these literary strata to the final form of the book, the shape it has at present? And for that matter, is not the meaning of the Genesis text affected by its position at the head of the canon and by the way other biblical passages interpret its parts? All of these questions can be posed in a general manner for the whole of Genesis, and they are equally pressing when one has a very limited pericope in view. It becomes all the more complex when one remembers that at potentially every one of the stages in this centuries-long process of development there are not simply literary and theological factors at work but also political, sociological, historical, ideological, ethical, institutional, intellectual forces.

Clearly, the interpreter must be selective if something more helpful than a mere compendium of all ascertainable data is to be offered to a reader or listener. But according to what principle should this selection be made? Precisely at this point will scholarly opinions vary. It is at its base a hermeneutical issue—at least to the extent that the decision
is not simply made arbitrarily. The principle can in nature be theological (e.g., a covenantal model best articulates the divine/human relationship), or historical (e.g., earlier is purer; or, later is more developed and refined), or literary (e.g., the power of the literature lies in its aesthetic artistry), or religiously authentic (e.g., the interpretation of the text must be attuned to that meaning traditionally authoritative for the Christian or the Jewish community of believers), or intellectually innovative (e.g., creativity is most obvious in the response of groups to specific historical crises), or any combination of these or others. Commentators and interpreters have not always made their intentions known, although there are some clear exceptions to this.¹

In what has become a classic commentary on Genesis, Gerhard von Rad made an intriguing comment about his own interpretational preference:

There is an unspoken agreement in Old Testament science that when studying the patriarchal stories one begins with the self-understanding of the Yahwist and the Elohist. That is not objectionable so long as one understands that it is not the only possible point of departure for exegesis. To proceed from the version in which J and E have presented the narrative material has advantages, to be sure; above all, this approach may be expressed more or less temporally and allows, therefore, the possibility of fruitful comparison with other texts, etc. For scientific study this must remain the point of departure for the time being; for considering the form and content which the texts had between the ninth and seventh centuries B.C., this point of departure could be surrendered only if some unanimity in exegesis were the goal. But we are still a long way from that... The question of whether the preacher and teacher are also to be tied to this hermeneutic point of departure is another question entirely.²

Von Rad thus set the Yahwistic and Elohistic levels of the Genesis literature at the center of his exegesis, not the least because of the theological interpretations for which he considered them responsible. Yet he acknowledged that other persons, especially teachers and preachers, may find it much more appropriate to consider, for example, the final stage in which J and E are combined with P into our present text. Von